

Local Optima: The Importance of Comparing Small Decisions in the Making of Large Empires

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Abstract: This essay is a response to Marsili's "The Ghosts of Monotheism: Heaven, Fortune, and Universalism in Early Chinese and Greco-Roman Historiography." By examining the problems of large-scale comparison, the concepts of "local optima," "semblance," and "complex adaptive systems" are explored. Despite reservations about the ability to conduct large-scale comparative projects like this, the essay argues that Marsili's project is successful because he compares processes instead of traits in the development of Greco-Roman and Chinese historiography.

Like many scholars, I am suspicious of large comparative projects in the study of religion. The study of large "world religions," like the study of empires, is such a large and diverse subject that comparative projects have the tendency, despite the efforts of their authors, to over-generalize. Departments rarely hire comparativists, and I consistently warn my graduate students that comparative work is often seen as superficial and best left to senior scholars who have big ideas, lots of experience, and, frankly, nothing to lose career-wise. It's worth noting that comparative scholarship of the best kind is usually only nominally comparative, as scholars often play to their own strengths. An expert on Southeast Chinese ritual from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries might attempt to write a large comparative study on Buddhist ritual but will favor Southeast Chinese ritual evidence from that time period. A specialist in early Sri Lankan Buddhist texts might have a tendency to view the rest of Buddhist Studies from a pre-modern Pali textual perspective. I tend to view Buddhist Studies through a textual perspective colored by my language skills and training in Thai and Theravada Buddhism. Furthermore, scholars often compare beliefs, doctrines, and concepts on the one hand, with institutional structures, on the other. Practical everyday happenings get lost as a scholar's gaze grows broader. As a student, I compared big things like two religious traditions' views on soteriology and the afterlife, or two traditions' understanding of the nature of the human person and opinions regarding the existence of evil.[1] Still, being a detailed-oriented scholar, I quickly grew dissatisfied and intimidated by broad comparisons. I just did not have the detailed knowledge in two different traditions, time periods, historical contexts, or language families required to

make the types of rigorous comparisons that I idealized. As a result, I soon gave up comparison as a practice in general. It was not until recently, while working on Buddhist architects from Japan who design religious structures in Nepal and Thailand, that I returned to comparison. In this regard, Filippo Marsili's article has been very sobering and helpful.

With the publication of Marsili's "The Ghosts of Monotheism: Heaven, Fortune, and Universalism in Early Chinese and Greco-Roman Historiography," I now have a model of comparison, which I can show to my students and use to guide my work. Marsili examines the role of the concept of Fortuna in the account of the formation of the early Roman empire in the Histories of Polybius (200–118 BCE). He compares Fortuna to the concept of tian (often translated as heaven or god), as found in the portrait of the formation of the Han empire in Sima Qian's (145?–86 BCE) The Records of the Grand Historian. By looking closely at the historical writings of Sima Qian and Polybius, he shows that the study of religion is not as a "meta-historical" assumption or explanatory tool for understanding major tragic events, profound existential questions, or broadly agreed-upon historical shifts. Instead, to these writers, religion was neither a meaning-making system, a series of socio-ethical assumptions, nor a conceptual justification for the existence of institutions, but rather a problem-solving technology deployed in specific instances to particular ends. Marsili actually shows the importance of the study of religion by demonstrating how these historians discounted its importance in legitimating the founding of the Chinese and Roman empires. In doing so, he challenges the view of religion promoted by Bellah, Durkheim, and many others, namely, as the belief in a singular, sacred power, that ascribes meaning to human actions and institutions. According to Marsili, such a view is not very useful for comparing two historians who saw religion as being very much concerned with the here and now. By looking at these two historians comparatively, Marsili is no longer looking at belief. Marsili instead focuses on what Lorand Matory calls the "proximate mechanisms" of knowledge change and continuity.[2] He shows that the study of religion is essential to the study of history, because it is akin to the study of the history of science, literature, art, or even sports. Religion is a highly effective and stimulating human pastime, absolutely fundamental to how humans form allegiances, describe enemies, and construct legal systems—and it is not merely an ethereal and cerebral meaning-making system relegated to quiet cloisters and hilltop sanctuaries, or an internally consistent doctrinal system that is enacted systematically by well-managed ecclesia. This broad reflection on the role of religion in the historiography of two vastly different empires shows the possibilities and benefits of comparison.

There are very few scholars like Marsili who can work with both Greek and Chinese materials seriously. With these language skills, Marsili shows that the study of religion can be very useful for the study of two widely different cultures if we study the series of choices that two groups of people make in very specific circumstances rather than comparing their larger belief systems or fully-formed teachings. In this way, Marsili

renders the comparison as the practice of studying choices rather than traits, processes as opposed to doctrines. Approaching comparative studies in this way allows us to begin to break out of what Arjun Appadurai calls the study of “trait geographies,” or the examination of the “inherent properties of peoples, soils, [and] cultures.”[3] Nations and peoples are seen as “clusters of traits.” Marsili sees processes in a different way—not as the ways in which different empires “act” under similar socio-historical circumstances and with similar material, climatic, and demographic advantages and limitations, but rather as the historiographical processes in which empires explain themselves.

To accomplish this, Marsili follows the methods of the two historians, thereby avoiding a notion of a “universalistic, super-ethnic religion that propounded the unity of the metaphysical, moral, and empirical realms.”[4] Instead of comparing the universalistic claims made by the glorious leaders of two empires, he compares how the best-known historians of these empires determined universalism: namely, the imperial decisions that put into process their universalist ambitions. The concept of “semblances” is useful here I believe. As Ulrich Timme Kragh has noted, comparison in modern Western literary theory involves four components of language: “comparatum, comparandum, semblance, and comparative phrase.”[5] These correspond to terms used in Sanskrit literary theory (*alanḱāraśāstra*), which were often used by Buddhist thinkers and writers: *upamāna*, *upameya*, *sādhāraṇadharmā*, and *upamāpratipādaka*. For example, Kragh writes,

In the comparison ‘The water sparkled like diamonds,’ the ‘diamonds’ are the comparatum (*upamāna*), i.e. the poetic image or object to which the water is compared. ‘The water’ is the comparandum (*upameya*), i.e. the subject of the comparison. ‘Sparkled’ is the semblance (*sādhāraṇadharmā*), namely the common quality of the comparatum and the comparandum, whereby the comparison is enabled. ‘Like’ is the comparative phrase (*upamāpratipādaka*) that effects the comparison.[6]

The semblance is the “quintessence of any comparison” because it unites “the image with its subject.”[7] Marsili focuses on the “semblances.” This allows him to compare verbs, not nouns. Sima Qian, the author of *The Records of the Grand Historian*, who was castrated under the orders of Emperor Wu, is important not necessarily for what he described, but for showing that the process of creating a unified empire “represented the realization of selfish interests via violence and scheming rather than the victory of a superior moralizing will.” “Through individual and collective biographies, annals, chronological tables, and monographic essays” his history “accounts for multiple subjectivities in a multifaceted narrative that complicates the recognition of straight lines of historical causation.” He demonstrated that “historical causes are to be sought beyond grandiose proclamations and official truths.” Similarly, Polybius did not conclude through the description of how divine will and fortune worked in Roman history that “the world must make sense as a whole,” and did not

"conceive the extra-human realm, 'the divine,' as intrinsically fair, coherent, or as One."

In this way, Marsili implicitly works against another common vagary that results from large comparative studies—the creation of ideal exemplars. Sima Qian and Polybius are perhaps the two greatest historians of their respective empires and have been relied on by historians for decades as primary sources. However, Sima Qian and Polybius do not create ideal exemplars or simply praise the roles of their founding emperors or tutelary deities in the unification of their empires. Biographies, whether of objects, places, or people, or in this case historians, have the tendency to promote the idea that there is such a thing as an independent entity and in turn make that person, place, or thing an ideal exemplar. This is compounded when the historians being compared were part of the process of creating the very idea of an empire through their craft. The creation of a series of exemplars, representatives, or the reviving of the "great man" approach to history posits that history is moved along by certain creative, tenacious, or trailblazing outliers. Marsili shows that Sima Qian and Polybius didn't create these exemplars or idealize the empires themselves. They saw empires as what I would call complex adaptive systems. Empires are made of agents and these agents are part of heterogeneous, dynamic, flexible, process-oriented, and ever-changing synchronic and diachronic networks.[8] They are complex, not just complicated. As computational modeling specialists John Miller and Scott Page state, "complexity is a deep property of a system, whereas complication is not. A complex system dies when an element is removed, but complicated ones continue to live on, albeit slightly compromised. Removing a seat from a car makes it less complicated; removing a timing belt makes it less complex (and useless). Complicated worlds are reducible, whereas complex ones are not." [9] The historians show that Emperor Wu or Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus might have been important parts of complex systems, but did not single-handedly create those empires. Moreover, these empires are not founded upon unified religious or cosmological ideals. Therefore, neither the leaders nor the religious concepts are ideal exemplars and necessary components to the system. In turn, Marsili shows, through a comparative biography of the historians, that they are also not ideal exemplars but "go-betweens," who were part of the process of creating the ways in which the empires are remembered.[10] They are not world leaders, spiritual masters, or once-in-a-generation philosophers. In fact, they could be called failures. When compared, these in-between agents are much more representative than the "great men" of history and teach us more about what is probable rather than what is simply possible.

Still, there is a problem with looking at agents, or, in this case, the historians and the leaders that they elevate, through the approach of computational models design by sociologists and social engineers. They have a tendency to focus on outcomes. Their systems model biological and mechanical behavior to produce solutions to issues of inefficiency, heat loss, reduced profits, or material stress. In my own humanistic work,

epitomized by a forthcoming study of Buddhist architects, I am not and have not been concerned much with outcomes. I practice a woefully inefficient and unprofitable craft. I am not really concerned (although I understand why other, more social scientifically and managerially-minded scholars would be) with studying ideal exemplars that successfully achieve optimal outcomes—great books, paradigm-shifting buildings, revolutionary theories, and inspirational epitaphs. Instead, I look at how certain agents, in my case, architects who attempt to represent Buddhist teachings in their building designs, and in Marsili's case, historians attempting to explain the formation of empires, "get stuck at local optima." [11] They settle on a series of small "goods" and abandon the optimal "perfection" that they initially wanted to reach in the end. Along the way, many agents have to develop alternative plans or, in computational-speak—"low-level adaptive algorithms"—and give up ideal outcomes or overarching models. [12] Through Sima Qian and Polybius, Marsili shows that sometimes lives and material creations are simply products of a series of local optima.

Marsili's article is a complex system itself. It shows us that the process of comparing the processes of different historians creating histories of dissimilar places doesn't necessitate concluding with a taxonomy of differences or similarities about the qualities of leaders, the material, social, economic, climatic, and demographic conditions of the empires themselves, or the belief systems of different religious traditions. Instead comparative religious historiography reveals that empires and even the after-the-fact historical descriptions of their emergence are characterized by a series of decisions by a diverse group of agents aimed not at fulfilling ideal notions of destiny or identity, but rather settling on local optima.

Notes

1. His views on comparison have been a subject of inspiration and debate for over thirty years and are discussed in numerous publications. Two places that provide an accessible overview are Jonathan Z. Smith, "A Matter of Class: Taxonomies of Religion," in his *Relating Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 160–78; and his "In Comparison a Magic Dwells," in *Imagining Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 19–35. Kimberley Patton and Benjamin Ray (eds.) provide an overview of the impact of Smith's work on comparison and new approaches to comparative religion in *A Magic Still Dwells* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). ↗
2. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), introduction. ↗
3. Appadurai presented this publicly at the Association of Asian Studies in 1997. I provide an example of this type of study in my *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008). ↗
4. Filippo Marsili, "The Ghosts of Monotheism: Heaven, Fortune, and Universalism in Early Chinese and Greco-Roman Historiography," *Fragments* 3–4: 44–78, 46. ↗

5. Ulrich Timme Kragh, "Of Similes and Metaphors in Buddhist Philosophical Literature: Poetic Semblance through Mythic Allusion," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 73(3) (2010): 479–502, 481. ↗
6. Ibid., 481. ↗
7. Ibid., 482. ↗
8. John Miller and Scott Page, *Complex Adaptive Systems* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 79. ↗
9. Ibid., 9. ↗
10. See, for example, Alida Metcalf's *Go-betweens and the Colonization of Brazil, 1500–1600* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005). Simon Schaffer, Lisa Roberts, Raj Kapil, and James Delbourgo, eds., *The Brokered World: Go-betweens and Global Intelligence, 1770–1820* (Sagamore Beach, Mass.: Watson Publishing International, 2009). ↗
11. Miller and Page, *Complex*, 81. ↗
12. Ibid., 82. ↗